

An Evaluation of Violence from Islam's Perspective

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This short essay is not going to attempt a detailed analysis of violence, neither from the perspective of human and social sciences nor that of religion per se. It shall rather argue that the psychological basis of the phenomenon of aggression is found within the animal nature that is common to all animals, and that it is not found outside this nature. Therefore, any analysis concerning the nature of this phenomenon cannot be carried out sociologically. However, its reflections within a society can be studied from this perspective. Hence, violence exists only in the animal kingdom and it must be studied from this perspective if we wish to understand its real nature. On the basis of this argument, our essay shall attempt to understand how Islam wants to remedy it. We may, furthermore, argue in this vein that aggression belongs to the animal nature and not to any particular mode of human activity though it is carried to that activity by humans. No religion is inherently violent; if we do not remedy our nature we carry it into the religion and add an interpretation of the religion to justify our violence on the basis of that religion. When someone observes this from the outside he/she interprets the religion as being violent. Let us try to investigate this from the perspective of human psychology and see its relevance in Islam.

Violence has, in fact, become a global problem in later decades not because there was no violence in the past but because it has become so widespread and diversified that now it is a global threat to human dignity and peace. If we have been living with violence for centuries and

it is something that has been with us since our existence on earth, we need to examine the exact nature of violence. We need to do this because most cases of violence seem to be done for a cause which itself vehemently opposes violence. This means that two mutually exclusive phenomena are brought together in many cases to defend an end. Religion is one of those phenomena which I believe opposes violence essentially. If we are examining the nature of violence from the perspective of Islam it may prove useful first to understand Islam's conception of religion. In general we may say that Islam sees religion as the Divine Guidance for humanity. It is clear from this that religion is God-given. Therefore, by definition human beings do not have an authority to establish religion. In other words, humans cannot make and unmake religion. Although religion is a Divine Guidance for humanity, it is not the kind of guidance that gives us an exhaustive list of how we should behave in any given situation. If this was the case we would have to act as robots according to that list, in which case there would be no room for human intellectual creativity in any field.

In that case, religion as a Divine Guidance bestows upon us two fundamental states of mind: one is the consciousness of the Divine Presence in all; the other is the moral sensitivity in our behavior. Both states of mind are expressed in general principles by religion. We therefore feel the need to interpret these principles in order to apply them to certain situations in our life, including violence. This need of interpretation gradually gives rise to a systematic exposition of religion as a system of guidance, as we are doing now to understand the nature of violence from Islam's perspective. In that case, this second intellectual understanding is also defined as religion. We thus need to distinguish between these two phenomena: Religion as Divine Guidance and Religion as the interpretation of this Divine Guidance; the former is Pure Religion and the latter is the religion within a certain cultural context. There is no harm in interpreting the

Pure Religion in a certain cultural context as long as this context is not dominated by the animal nature. It is, on the other hand, inevitable and indeed required by God to do this kind of an intellectual activity; a requirement that is clear in the fact that He does not send His Guidance as a complete set of rules readily available to be applied to human life. In the face of this approach, then, we can say that when religion is interpreted it becomes mixed with human characters including of course our animal nature. Let us then try to understand this nature vis-à-vis violence.

Most studies and discussions on the stand of religion in general in relation to violence have either a political or a sociological approach. These approaches will not uncover the solution a religion and particularly Islam offers for this problem. We may try to analyze man's psychology to understand why some people prefer violence to solve their problems or to reach their desired end. Therefore, a psychological approach is more suitable to reveal the stand of religion in relation to violence. In this way we may reveal the real nature of violence. I believe that this approach is also more suitable for the Qur'anic *weltanschauung*. Our analysis will try to show this aspect of Islam also, which is at the same time a clear sign for the stand of Islam against any type of violence and human aggression.

As far as man is concerned, it seems that violence is actually a state of mind which is found in animal nature. This nature is given to man as to all other animals to protect themselves from outside danger. This purpose of the animal nature is known to animals instinctively and thus not violated. But human beings need to learn the purpose of this animal nature as well as other similar states of mind in order to be able to bring them under their control. This can be illustrated by an example: a child usually does not know he or she needs to share his/her belongings, toys, for instance, with his/her friends. Sharing is only one aspect of human social

coexistence, and without such behaviour our society cannot fully function. Therefore, we need to teach the child how to share and that sharing is good for us. This way the child is able to grasp the purpose of his/her behaviour. Later in life every person may be able to understand that the state of mind which reflects the attitude of not sharing is naturally given to us to protect ourselves against outside threats. But if this attitude is used in every social behaviour then it leads to chaos. Violence and aggression are similar states of mind which are extended over to areas for which they are not intended, and thus they need to be remedied.

Before we discuss in detail how Islam offers a cure for this human disease inherited from our animal nature, we may try to analyze that nature itself. As it is known, Aristotelian psychology claims that human nature is endowed with certain capacities which are carried out by one's soul. One of these capacities is identified as "animal soul" which fulfils the function of local motion and sensation. In fact Aristotle singles out some psychic powers which are carried out by the soul; these are more specifically "the nutritive, the appetitive, the sensory, the locomotive and the power of thinking." (*On the Soul*, ch. 3). The vegetative soul carries out nutrition. The animal soul carries out that of locomotion and sensation, and the human soul carries out the function of thinking. This theory of soul was sufficient for the Muslim philosophers to interpret certain Qur'anic verses, some of which will be discussed below more specifically. But today psychology is not employing the Aristotelian perspective which was utilized by earlier Muslim philosophers such as Ibn Sina, Mawardi, Miskawayh, al-Ghazali and al-Razi. The specific point here that concerns us is the "animal soul" which is expressed by them as "al-nafs al-haywaniyyah". In that case we may refer to this aspect of humans by a more general name which cannot be denied by any thinker. Let that term be "animal nature". We do have a nature which we share with other animals, as expressed by the philosophers. But we have

something “more” than the animals and that is what makes us humans. It is this human nature that can elevate us above the animal nature. I believe that all religions try to build up the human aspect in order to overcome our weaknesses expressed in our animal nature.

We must now understand that since violence is also a state of mind embedded in our animal nature that possesses it biologically, it is not a characteristic that is given to individuals by their culture or religion. But it is possible to develop a culture based on this animal nature; a culture of violence. The interesting point is that this kind of a culture cannot establish a civilization, because a civilization in the religious sense has human values which cannot be nurtured under such aggressive circumstances. It is for this reason that Muslim scholars of the past referred to Islam as “the greater humanism” (*al-insaniyyat al-kubrah*). We should try to understand this conclusion on the basis of the Qur’anic *weltanschauung*. In order to remedy this disease of the psychological state of human personality, the Qur’an deeply analyzes the inner self of the individual so that his “heart” (*qalb*) becomes transparent to himself. In this analysis all evil feelings are laid bare before the person so that he can be attentive to the Truth, because it is those evil feelings that block his mind to understand and passionately appreciate the Truth:

Man is by nature unstable; when misfortune touches him he panics and when good things come his way, he prevents them from reaching others.

(70/al-Ma’ârij, 19- 21)

Human personality has been permeated with greed or selfishness (hence be attentive against this nature of your personality). (4/al-Nisâ’, 128)

The one, who makes his personality pure, shall be successful, while the one who corrupts it shall be in the loss. (91/al-Shams, 9-10)

The successful are those who can save themselves from their own selfish personality. (59/al-Hashr, 9)

Nay! But you love the immediate (i.e., the present life) and abandon the distant (i. e., the Hereafter). (75/al-Qiyamah, 20)

This nature of man is reflected in the Qur'anic story of Adam's creation:

Behold, your Lord said to the angels: "I will create a vicegerent on earth." They said: "Will You create one who will make mischief and shed blood there? Whereas we do celebrate Your praises and glorify You." He said: "I know what you do not." (Then He created Adam) and taught him the Names of all things. Then he placed things before the angels and said: "Tell Me the names of these (things) if you are right." They said: "Glory be to You. We have no knowledge except what you have taught us. Verily it is You that is perfect in knowledge and wisdom." He said: "O Adam! Tell them their names." When he told them, God said: "Did I not tell you that I know the secrets of heaven and earth, and I know what you reveal and what you conceal?" (2/al-Baqarah, 30-33)

The fact that this verse indicates that "(Then He created Adam) and taught him the Names of all things" leads us to conclude that the animal nature is biological but goodness is divine, given us as a Gift, called "Guidance" (*hidayah*).

We have honored the children of Adam, provided them transport on land and sea, given them for sustenance good and pure food and conferred upon them special favor above many of our creation. (17/Al-Isra', 70)

The children of Adam are honored with two “gifts”; a human nature which, if rightly is used can overcome the weaknesses of the animal nature; and the other is the “guidance” provided by religion as a favor of God to show us how we can overcome the weaknesses of our animal aspects. When this guidance is neglected, a state of mind or a disposition that is guided by our animal nature rules supreme. Violence is among the results of this negligence.

We must now try to explain within this context the psychology of animal nature reflected in many other states of mind, which we consciously or unconsciously project. Generally speaking the content of human mind is what we call knowledge. This content is also that which gives form to our thinking. When something is affirmed and accepted by the person then his mind begins to take the form of that knowledge. The affirmation of that knowledge also brings with itself certain other problems concerning it. Then the mind attempts to solve these problems. Through time the mind finds answers to those problems because it cannot remain indifferent to them. Usually in this process of acquiring the content, a worldview in its totality begins to take shape. No human mind can ever remain without holding a worldview however naive and simple it may be. The content of the mind is then not so simple; for it is “knowledge in its totality”. Although this knowledge is the content yet after developing this primary knowledge into a worldview, the human mind becomes the content, and the knowledge as worldview becomes like a mold and a receptacle for the mind. In this way the mind takes the form, more allegorically the shape, of that knowledge. The mind in this state may become so hardened that it can no longer adopt itself to understanding another explanation offered for reality. Sometimes the human mind may become so blind that it will not even consider the alternative view no matter how close this view may be to the truth. This is the “prejudiced mind” in its hardened state.

The Qur'an makes a definite reference to this state of human mind: "There is deafness in their ears, and to them the truth is blindness; they are as though being called to the truth from a distant place." (41/Fussilat, 44); "their hearts are sealed; therefore, they do not understand." (9/al-Tawbah, 87). In a lengthy passage the Qur'an powerfully depicts this human situation with vivid metaphors:

As to those who reject Faith it is the same to them whether you warn them [i.e., explain them the Truth] or not, they will not believe [i.e., they will not even consider to understand the truth you are communicating]. (Therefore) God has sealed their hearts and hearing [i.e., their perceptive faculties]; and on their eyes is a veil... They would (try to) deceive God and the believers; but they deceive only themselves and yet they do not realize (this). In their hearts is a disease and God has increased their disease. There is a grievous penalty for them because they cry lies (even to themselves). When it is said to them: "Do not make corruption on the earth", they say: "Why, we only want to establish order." They are truly the ones who cause corruption, but they do not realize (this)... Their similitude is that of a man who kindled a fire, and when it lighted all around him. God took away their light and left them in utter darkness, unseeing, deaf, dumb and blind, they will not return (to the Truth). Or (another similitude) is that of a rain-laden cloud from the sky; in it are zones of darkness, and thunder and lightning. They press their fingers in their ears to keep out the stunning thunderclap, trembling from the fear of death. But God is ever encompassing the rejecters of Faith (i.e., Truth)... If

God willed He could take away their faculty of hearing and seeing. For
God has power over all things. (2/al-Baqarah, 6-20)

There is a softer prejudice in human mental states, which is psychological and has a moral dimension. In this case the person considers other opinions acting as if he is willing to understand; but actually he wants to examine them closely in order to find more ways to refute them, not to understand them. Neither can the human mind ever understand and appreciate those opinions in this state. For the totally unprejudiced human mind is like wax which can easily take the form of every mold; whereas the prejudiced mind is like metal which, once taking the form of a mold, can take other forms only with extreme hardship. The knowledge that we mentally acquire thus plays the role of a mold. Although in the process of acquiring knowledge it is our mind that is actually active (because it is the willing subject) yet at the end it becomes passive and thus that knowledge becomes active in molding our mind: a psychological disease against which we must be very cautious.

The first step the Qur'an takes, in breaking the bondage of prejudice and thus clearing the way for the Truth by sharpening the human faculties making them "receptive" to it, is to establish a mutual relationship between man and Truth. In this relationship man is represented as the "receiver" of Truth, whereas the Qur'an is represented as the "giver" of Truth (i.e., guidance; the Qur'anic term for this is *hidayah*). The "receiver" must perform his responsibilities because the "giver" has already done so. Those responsibilities are all subjective experiences some of which may fall within the scope of morality; for he/she has to be sincere, for example, in searching the Truth and willing to acquire it.

Then the Qur'an tries to sharpen human feelings in searching the Truth. Both, the human mind and feelings must be affectionately directed to the Truth. Never in the history of ideas have

human feelings (or emotions) been asserted as faculties of discernment in the search for truth, although they have always been imbedded in us just like our mental states. It is the eternal divine decree that requires every individual to sharpen and develop his/her faculties by making effort from within himself/herself. This effort cannot be only a mental effort; it must also be a psychological (or emotive) effort. For humans consist of a mind and a heart, which may be taken as the faculty of feelings. It is now clear that in the first instance the Qur'an wants to clear the human mind from prejudices of animal nature and the human heart from "unwillingness" and its evil tendencies which make it difficult to be attentive to the Truth; and thus prepares the ground for the second step which is more rational and requires clear proofs for the Truth.

It is God, who causes the seed and the date-stone to split and sprout. He brings forth the living from the dead, and brings forth the dead from the living. That is, then, God; how are you driven away from the truth? He splits (the night to bring it) into dawn, He makes the night for rest, and the sun and the moon for reckoning (the time). That is the judgment of Him, the All mighty, the All-knowing. It is He who appointed the stars for you to guide yourselves through the darkness on the land and sea. We have so explained in detail our proofs for people who know. And it is He who originated you from a single person, a living place, and a sanctuary. We have so explained in detail our proofs for people who understand. It is He who sends down water from the sky, and we bring forth with it vegetation of all kinds. From it we produce the greenery out of which we produce grain...dates... olives, pomegranates. Each similar yet they are unlike each other. Look at their fruits when they begin to give fruits and then ripen.

There are proofs (in all these) for people who believe... That, then, is God, your Lord. There is no god but He, the Creator of everything. So serve Him, because He is Guardian over everything. The eyes cannot grasp Him but He can grasp the eyes... Now clear proofs have been given to you from your Lord. Whoso sees them it is for himself (for his own good) and whoso becomes blind (not to see them), it is to his own (loss). (6/al-An'am, 95-104; see also 67/al-Mulk, 3-4; 24/al-Nur, 39; 2/al-Baqarah, 118; 52/al-Tur, 29-49)

In order to strengthen man's weak personality so that he will not lose against his feelings, the Qur'an also offers psychological proofs for the Truth:

Those who remember God standing, sitting and lying down and reflect upon the creation of the heaven and the earth, and say: "Our Lord! You have not created all this in vain" (38/ Sad,17).

We have not created the heaven and the earth and whatever is between them for mere entertainment. (21/al-Anbiya', 16)

Do you think that we have created you purposelessly and that you will not be returned to Us? The True Covering is too exalted above that. (23/al-Mu'minun, 115)

Does man think that he will be left wandering (without a purpose)? (75/al-Qiyamah, 36)

And who other than God created the heavens and the earth and sent down for you water from the sky, whereby we cause to grow lush orchards-For it is not up to you to cause their trees to grow! Is there, then, a god beside

God? Yet these are the people who ascribe partners to Him! And who other than Him made the earth a firm abode (for you), and set rivers traversing through it, and put firm mountains therein and sealed off one sea from the other? Is there, then, a god beside God? Indeed, most of them do not know! And who other than Him responds to the distressed one when he calls Him and relieves him of the distress, and Who has made you His vicegerents on earth? Is there, then, a god beside God? Little do you reflect! And who other than Him guides you in the darkness of the land and the sea? And who sends forth winds announcing His mercy (i.e., rain)? Is there, then, a god beside God? Far exalted be He above what they associate with Him! And who other than Him brings forth His creation and then re-creates it? And who gives you sustenance from the heaven and the earth? Is there, then, a god beside God? (27/al-Naml, 60-64)

O people! A parable is being cited, listen well to it. Those whom you call upon besides God can never create a fly, even if all of them came together to do so. And if a fly were to take away something from them, they can never get it back from it! Both the seeker and the sought are equally helpless. They have not estimated God rightly. God is powerful, mighty. (22/al-Hajj, 73-74)

With this approach, human personality, with its mental and psychological states, is satisfied. Since this satisfaction does not come about with prejudice, the human mind is not afflicted with the same diseases of animal nature. The human person at this state is called by the

Qur'an as "satisfied soul" (*al-nafs al-mutma'innah*), because he/she has been acquainted with the truth:

We shall show them our proofs in the horizon, and in themselves until it is clear to them that it is the Truth (41/Fussilat, 53)

In this stage if man has accomplished what the Qur'an communicated then he has fully developed his faculties for experiencing the Truth. All his faculties are attentive to any Truth, and he can now develop his understanding further in order to ascend the levels of higher knowledge; because the purpose of the Qur'an is achieved, the rest is left for the individual to struggle by his own free will.

The human person at this stage is ready to receive commands of God which also include non-violence. This attitude is so clear in the Qur'an that only one verse is sufficient to explain everything:

If any one kills a person, it is as if he killed all humanity, unless for murder or for spreading mischief in the land. And if any one saves a life, it would be as if he saved the life of the whole people. (5/al-Ma'idah, 32)

Then a principle is also set to show the actual approach of a person endowed with authentic human nature:

...Those who restrain anger and forgive people [are given abundant reward]. For, God loves those who accomplish goodness. (3/Al Imran, 134)

Such is Islam's peaceful solution to violence. On the other hand we must emphasize that within this peaceful understanding individuals must be educated so that they do not give in to

their animal nature. After all as the Qur'an says: "God's mercy encompasses everything." We must also approach events and humans with this understanding of love and mercy.

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